DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 447 285 CE 080 919

AUTHOR	Misson, Ray
TITLE	Imagination, the Individual and the Global Media.
PUB DATE	2000-04-09
NOTE	13p.; In: Cross-Roads of the New Millennium. Proceedings of the Technological Education and National Development (TEND) Conference (2nd, April 8-10, 2000, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates); see CE 080 883.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Education; *Adult Learning; Creative Thinking; *Cultural Context; Definitions; *Educational Environment; Educational Needs; Educational Trends; Foreign Countries; Global Approach; *Imagination; *Individual Development; Internet; Learning Theories; Needs Assessment; Postmodernism; Student Centered Curriculum; *Transformative Learning; Trend Analysis
IDENTIFIERS	Australia; Poststructuralism

ABSTRACT

The relationship between imagination, the individual, and the global media was examined. The examination focused on two underpinning theorizations of individuality, namely, the notion of the "discursive construction of subjectivity" that draws on the work of various poststructuralist thinkers and Judith B*ker's notion of the "performative." The following aspects of global culture were considered: (1) the prevalence of "liquid" metaphors, the metaphor of the net as in "network," and the metaphor of space as in "cyberspace" in current discourses of globalization; (2) the conflicting views of globalization as imperialist and democratic; (3) the conflicting visions of individuals operating on the Internet as active and passive; and (4) the conflicting visions of individuals accessing the Internet as isolated and connected. Imagination was characterized as a function of the mind that is transformative and driven by some inadequacy in reality. The implications of these aspects of individuality, global culture, and imagination for adult learning were explored. It was concluded that, in a culture that is changing as rapidly as the present global culture, a curriculum promoting imagination and creativity is needed so that students can feel themselves in control of the change and so that the change can be purposeful. (MN)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 447 285

TEND 2000

Crossroads of the New Millennium

Imagination, the Individual and the Global Media

Prepared and Presented

By

Dr. Ray Misson

Assoc. Professor and Head of Department

Language, Literacy and Arts Education

University of Melbourne

email : r.misson@edfac.unimelb.edu.au

Sunday 9 April, 2000

Workshop 2

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
A. Billingsley
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CG 029 919

Imagination, the Individual and the Global Media

This paper is speculative: it does not report on research done (although I think it opens up some significant questions for research). What it does is take three areas in which there has been a great deal of interesting work in recent times, and speculates on what their connection might mean for education. The three areas are those indicated by my title, and one could ask a number of different questions about the connections, reconfiguring the three in relation to each other. But the questions I am going to ask take creativity and the imagination as the endpoint - as what is being educated for – and ask what are the implications for this of the new kind of subjectivity that is being created by global culture.

INDIVIDUALITY

There are two (related) underpinning theorisations of individuality that I want to establish here. The first is the notion of the "discursive construction of subjectivity" drawing on the work of various poststructuralist thinkers, but most notably Althusser and Foucault, the second stems from the work of Judith Butler and her notion of the "performative".

In very brief summary, the theory of the discursive construction of subjectivity is that our world addresses us in certain ways through the discourses available in the society, and in doing so, it creates us as a particular kind of person. We become the person who is assumed as the receiver of the discourse, taking on the ideological assumptions, seeing the world in the way the discourse shows it to us. We are subject to many discourses as operating members of society, and what we are as individuals is the sum of the available discourses that we operate in. It is a profoundly anti-essentialist theory, seeing the individual person as socially constructed through and through.

One of the limitations of this conceptual framework is that it does give the impression of the individual person being a *tabula rasa* on which the discourses of the society are imprinted. Judith Butler, working within this general framework, has taken Austin's notion of the performative, and worked with it to develop a more subtle and complex theorisation of the construction of subjectivity (Butler: 1990, 1993, 1997). Again to simplify, but even more outrageously, Butler argues that we are created as individual subjects by acting out the ways of being that society and culture insist on. We perform ourselves into being. This has been

particularly useful in that it brings the body into consideration, and so sees subjectivity as not just a matter of the mind but as materially embodied. (Her second, and perhaps most influential book is called *Bodies that Matter* (1993).

It is a limitation that such ways of thinking can give no really satisfactory account of irreducible human difference (or perhaps simply do not choose to take it into account), since they see the foundation of human subjectivity as social. It must be stressed that if we are constructed discursively, that each person, through their specific mix of cognitive capacities, libidinal drives, etc. is constituted from a different configuration of the discourses. Not each discourse is equally constitutive for each person, but we are all fairly unique mixes of the available discourses.

The final point that I want to make on the construction of the individual is about the importance of the private domain. Cultural Studies is often scorned by sociologists because of its lack of interest in such things as hard-edged economics, demographics, government regulations and workplace practices, seeing it as frivolously concerned with analysing everyday texts, television and films, newspapers, sporting events and other elements of popular culture, when the real social action is taking place elsewhere. I don't want to underestimate the value of sociological analysis, but I do want to insist on the importance of those leisure texts and the social practices that occur in what Gramsci calls the private domain. The importance of this domain is that it is an area of (apparent) choice, one in which we feel ourselves to be free agents. Whereas we can't choose which side of the road to drive on, or whether or not to pay taxes, we can choose whether we listen to Macy Gray or Philip Glass, watch *Friends* or *The Bill*, buy *Playboy* or *Time* magazine, and these choices are felt to be expressive of ourselves, stemming from and confirming the kind of person we "really" are. So, although the elements in the public realm may be more important to the functioning of society, the elements in the private realm are felt to be closer to what we are as people, and therefore particularly powerful. It goes without saying that the freedom is in many ways illusory, and of course the areas of choice are frequently part of what Althusser has called the ideological state apparatuses (1984), but that does not undercut their significance in constructing our sense of ourselves at all.

GLOBAL CULTURE

Saying anything briefly about global culture is almost as impossible as saying anything about the individual, so I need to acknowledge immediately that I am aware I am only concentrating on some very limited aspects of globalisation, and in particular that I am ignoring to a large extent globalisation as an economic phenomenon. If a justification is needed for this, it is that my ultimate concern is what all this means for students in schools, and globalisation tends not to be experienced explicitly in economic terms in their lives. I am also interested in how globalisation is perceived popularly, the kind of construction that is made of it in the media, rather than looking at it in academic terms.

There are a few aspects of globalisation that are important for my purposes here, and since I am interested in experiential aspects, I am inevitably going to be impressionistic.

One of the striking things about current discourses of globalisation is the prevalence of "liquid" metaphors. The basic one is of the "flow" of information, that sense of digitised information coursing freely around the world, more like the world's lifeblood than like a river or a flood. We talk of "channels of information", channels being purposefully constructed by humans, rather than naturally occurring like rivers. There is a great deal of talk of "convergence" these days, the convergence of different media, where that flow of information converges into a single channel, usually the channel of the internet, so that in time newspapers, television, banking services, shopping - virtually all aspects of life, it seems - will be most readily available through the net. Institutions – governmental and corporate - have become "porous", their boundaries uncertain as the information flows in and out.

The other dominant (related) metaphor is that of the net as in "network" (or the web), suggesting the complex interconnectivity of the global world, and of course, the dispersal that is fundamental to it. Sitting at one's machine, one is at a node of this global net, connected with everything out there in cyberspace.

"Space" (as in "cyberspace") is a third metaphor – that one is set free in a virtually boundless virtual universe that is available to race through and command, although this in fact seems less used as a metaphor (as powerfully as it is given imaginative reality in some fiction,

particularly the novels of William Gibson), perhaps because the reality of the technology is still so much slower and clunkier and constricted than the metaphor suggests. It's a metaphor beyond globalisation - not constricted to this world – that hasn't quite happened yet, although the notion of the boundlessness of the internet is certainly a current potent image.

As one would expect with anything as powerful and pervasive as electronic global culture, its features are read in polarised ways, and contradictory versions and prognoses are given. It's useful to use these tensions to map out certain features, particularly in relation to how people are seen in terms of globalisation:

IMPERIALIST/DEMOCRATIC

One version of globalisation is that it is simply economic imperialism. The controlling centre of the empire is seen either as the USA or as large corporations that have outgrown national boundaries (such as Microsoft and Newscorp). The function of the global media (including the internet) is hegemonic, to erase national difference and deliver the whole world up as a market to (American) corporations. People are thus seen as ideological victims.

Alternatively, the internet in particular is seen as profoundly democratic. We have never had such choice before. The sheer uncontrolled and uncontrollable anarchy of the Internet is celebrated, and seen as undercutting the power of nation and corporation. Anyone can set up a web page and make themselves their own media star, asserting their individual existence.

There are various other inflections of this basic opposition:

- The flow is seen to be emanating from the national and corporate giants, but there is also a reverse flow of ideas and demands back that can influence the giants;
- The network/web can be seen as either an entirely dispersed system without a centre, or rather with every node a potential centre in a riot of postmodern relativity. Alternatively, the web is seen as spreading out from a particular imperialist centre, with a very big spider in the middle of it.

The influence of globalisation is seen as homogenising, working to make us all want to consume the same things and see the world in the same way, but on the other hand, it is

argued that we have more choice than ever before, and the effect of globalisation is a greater capacity to express individuality and to have customised products that suit ourselves.

PASSIVE/ACTIVE

There are two visions of the person operating on the internet or with multimedia: one seeing them as passive, the other as active. Working on a computer is sedentary; but of course one is interacting with the screen in a physical way that one isn't even with television for example. One influences what appears. I actually think that the classic active/passive dyad is not quite accurate here. The differing views depend on whether the human being is seen as becoming an extension of the machine, or whether she/he is seen as in control of the machine. The negative side of this draws on the myth of the robot or the cyborg, and stems from the fear of dehumanisation, of people turning into machines. The positive side draws on the notion of technology as tool, extending human capacity in a controlled enhancing way, the machine working under the control of the human being to achieve human purposes.

ISOLATION/CONNECTION

There is another oppositional access in play when conceptualising people sitting at their machines, accessing the internet. They can be seen either as isolated or as connecting with a rich and extensive global community. Sitting looking at a screen, one is not connecting physically with those around but losing contact with one's immediate material reality. On the other hand, there is a great deal of rhetoric about connecting with a global community, that the local is replaced by the whole world. Actually, more often than a sense of connecting with the whole world, the emphasis is on connecting with a virtual community of like-minded people, people with the same interests. Some would see this as creating stronger deeper communities, others will see it as a dangerous fragmentation.

I hope that the connection between what I have been saying about global culture and what I said about the construction of the individual is clear. The engagement with the texts and even the bodily practices produced by participating in a global culture will have a profound effect on how we might conceive of ourselves as individuals. The texts we receive will be discursively constructing our subjectivity; our physical disposition in front of the computer screen will be constructing us in certain ways.

I have been concerned to try to seem even-handed in setting up the oppositions in the attitudes to global culture, and not suggest that one or the other side is the "true" one, because neither or both in any case are simply true. Undoubtedly the internet can be seen as either positive or negative and has enormous potential actually to be both: it should be a major feature of education to try to release the positive potential.

IMAGINATION/CREATIVITY

There is a great deal of work around on imagination and creativity, although not as much of it as one might expect relates to schooling. It is an area in which there is much still to be done. I want, just briefly to sketch in some of the features of the creative imagination.

Basically, imagination is a function of the human mind, like memory or reasoning or any of the other functions. I want to make this point strongly to stress that there is nothing mystical about the creative imagination: it simply operates on the material that is present in the mind. It has both cognitive and affective aspects, bridging the two domains.

In moving out from this basic conception, my thinking has been most influenced by some work by David Feldman, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and Howard Gardner (1994), although I am just going to introduce here a couple of elements from their model that I think are suggestive for my purposes in this paper, and they would undoubtedly see the account I give as seriously distorting their work.

The crucial thing about the action of the creative imagination is that it is transformative. It takes preexistent material and transforms it. The transformations often seem to be combinative: i.e. disparate fragments are taken and brought together to produce a new whole. There are several implications of this transformative nature that I want to point out.

1. That the imagination produces something new, but it does it out of pre-existing materials. As opposed to some older beliefs about the imagination, it doesn't operate divorced from the outside world, cavorting in its own inner space, but rather takes what the outside world presents to the mind and operates on it.

2. That creativity will usually happen within a discipline, within a particular field with its own boundaries and rules, and it will be different in each. It may draw on insights garnered from other fields. The boundaries and rules may be extended, but the control of the discipline is presupposed, even though it might seem from the outside that the creative development is a totally new way of thinking.
3. That creativity will always be socially/culturally conditioned. Since the imagination works on material that comes from the world of a particular culture, perceived by someone from within that culture, the outcomes will be very different depending on what social and cultural frameworks the imagining person is operating in.

However, given all that, I would also claim: That the product of the imagination has an irreducibly individual element. Because the imagination is not always under rational control, because the self that produces the transformations is a unique amalgam of discourses and experiences, the creative product will be individual and personal, and will tend to be strongly felt as such.

The final issue about the creative imagination that I want to touch on briefly is the matter of what drives it. The general agreement is that it is desire for things to be different than they are. Some inadequacy in reality, some perception that things would be better if they were changed, or even some fear of the present state of affairs drives people to create a way to make things different, to solve the problem. There has been interesting work on creativity and the affective realm (see, for example, Shaw and Runco 1994), and creativity does seem often to have both an affective origin, and an affective element in its operation, even if only at the level of the intensity with which the mind becomes open to new possibilities or of the excitement of discovery.

BRINGING IT TOGETHER: WHAT IT MEANS FOR EDUCATION

These three areas that we have been looking at seem disparate, and it might appear that it will take a considerable degree of imagination and creativity to bring them together and relate them to education. It will take even more skill not to become simplistic and fall back on superficialities in the attempt to generalise.

The first point I would want to make is that, while there is a great deal of very proper interest in the impact of global technology on education in terms of curriculum and pedagogy, we must not forget that globalisation is delivering a different kind of person to schools to be educated. If you are a teenager who spends time playing CD-ROM games, downloading music from the Internet, participating in chat rooms (perhaps under a pseudonym with an alternative personality you've created), then you are not going to be the same kind of person as those who were being educated ten years ago.

I don't want to try to map out what the differences will be, because obviously the differences will be extraordinarily complex and subtle, as well as extraordinarily various. I will, however, suggest two very general things. First of all, I want to invoke the notion of the postmodern subject, the kind of person who operates in different discourses, identifies with different subject positions in different spheres, and does not see their reality as fundamentally invested in any one of them, but rather as dispersed over the field. They are not concerned by inherent contradictions because they are satisfied to live out different realities in different sphere. One might see it as the human being as portfolio: postmodern person is portfolio person. Increasingly students are operating with this kind of multiplicity.

The second element is a kind of openness and confidence, an expectation of diversity and even chaos but without any sense of panic in dealing with it. There is a sense of being in control, not through intellectual command, but through having control of the technology, having the ability to access whatever you want, setting the search engines running. But also there is a sense of being rather pleasantly out-of-control as you leap across the hyperlinks, never being exactly sure what might turn up. This is met with a blasé openness, and a feeling that one can make use or not of what appears as the mood or the need arises. The input of teachers is just part of the avalanche of information coming that may or may not be engaged with.

The implications for curriculum generally are that at least part of the work of schools is to make the handling of global information more purposeful, to help students search more efficiently, to help them be more discriminating in their sifting through what they access, to make them vigilant against distortion.

However, although the getting and the sifting of information may be fundamental, it is certainly far from sufficient if we wish to develop a creative curriculum, and I want quickly to explore just a few aspects of what happens when we bring what I was saying about global culture up against the work on creativity to suggest some of the dimensions of a curriculum designed to promote creativity.

I was suggesting that the kinds of oppositions around the popular perceptions of global electronic culture suggest the positive and negative potential. We need to equip students to work with the positive potential and avoid the negative. There is no doubt that the internet can make one subject to the corporate will, but there is also no doubt that it can be a very free and open medium in which an individual can have a degree of control. The flow of information can simply carry you along, or you can channel the flow to your own purposes. One can be passive and just take in what's given, but one can be active and use the material in ways that serve and confirm your individuality. Students need to be equipped to make the latter choices.

If the creative imagination works on external material, then there is no doubt that global culture provides material in extraordinary amounts and of extraordinary diversity. But it is not just a matter of taking in the material, if one wants to be creative; it is a matter of doing something with it. As I said, the basic operation of the creative imagination is transformative. The actual operation of the internet, or indeed of the global media in general, supports this in some ways. Information is continually being recontextualised and so its meaning changed as you flip from bit to bit.

More significantly, digital information, not having a material form is easily modified, and so there is extraordinary potential for transformation. Students need to get into the mental habit of asking critical questions about the validity of information, but also of asking questions about what it can be used for, looking for ways in which it can be usefully combined with other information, brought into meaningful arrangements, transformed into something more useful.

As well as getting them to discard rubbish, it seems to me important to encourage them not to foreclose too quickly, but to see the potential in what is there. Keats in one of his letters coins the much-celebrated phrase, "Negative Capability" as being the quality that distinguishes the great poet, the person of creative imagination. It is the ability to stay in doubt and explore "without any irritable reaching after Fact and Reason" without trying to pin things down and make them manageable. Our postmodern students are half-way there to that quality, with their sense of relativity and their blasé attitude, but education should be working to make them more actively seek out the potential, rather than simply taking in the information or being dismissive.

So the open flow of the internet, and the interactivity possible with it has the potential to enhance creative work, but education needs to do more than simply let students loose. Education is also about discipline, and so is creativity. One doesn't see potential in something unless one sees a framework in which it can fit. Information is very often meaningless unless the context is known. Creativity can't be developed in abstract: it must be creativity in a field or a combination of fields. (I wouldn't for a moment want to underplay the importance of multidisciplinary or multimodal work.) Creativity also implies moving beyond what is known or has been done before, and you would never know if you were creative or not if you didn't know the field. To think outside the frame, you need to know where the frame is. So, a creative curriculum is not a generic one or an undisciplined one. Students must be able to contextualise and frame the flow of information to make it useful, to effect meaningful transformations on it.

The information, like the student, is also socially contextualised, albeit in a global culture, and students need to understand that. Creativity happens within a social context. Global media can give the impression of universality, but, of course, everything is a product of a particular culture, and to work creatively one should know the understandings that are underpinning the material and the limitations imposed by the cultural framing, perhaps in order to see beyond them. One can appropriate and transform the material, but this is more likely to have a genuinely creative outcome if done with cultural understanding.

Finally, I spoke about the grounding of creativity in affect, in the desire for change or at least the desire to fulfil some purpose. This seems to me to be the greatest difficulty in educating for creativity, involving the student in an engaged and purposeful way. I think there are no easy answers on this one, although a problem-based curriculum is more likely to achieve the necessary creative engagement.

In a culture that is changing so rapidly, the need for a curriculum that promotes imagination and creativity is apparent, so that our students can feel themselves in control of the change, and for the change to be purposeful. As you will have seen, I have few answers, but I hope I have suggested something about the scope of the challenge.

REFERENCES

- Althusser, L., (1984). *Essays in ideology.* London, Verso.
- Barker, C., (1999). *Television, Globalisation and Cultural Identities.* Buckingham and Philadelphia, Open University Press.
- Butler, J., (1990) Gender *trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* New York, Routledge.
- Butler, J., (1993). *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'.* New York and London, Routledge.
- Butler, J., (1997). *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection.* Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- Feldman, D., M. Csikszentmihalyi, et al., (1994). *Changing the World: A Framework for the Study of Creativity.* Westport, Connecticut and London, Praeger.
- Shaw, M. P. and M. A. Runco, eds., (1994). *Creativity and Affect.* Norwood, New Jersey, Ablex.
- Willinsky, J., (1999). *Technologies of Knowing.* Boston, Beacon.